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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether students expected course difficulty to be reflected in grade distributions and in the amount of out-of-class effort required for success. Students from both upper and lower division classes described the amount of time they expected to spend preparing for an easy class, a difficult class, and a class taught at just the right level. They also indicated their expectations regarding the grade distribution in classes of varying difficulty. There was no difference between upper and lower division students on any measure. Students believed that both an easy course and a course taught at just the right level would have a negatively skewed grade distribution, whereas a difficult course would have a normal distribution. On average, students believed that the appropriate number of out-of-class hours per week was 4.9. Further, students in this sample judged that the 6-9 hours of out-of-class work that is typically recommended, to be characteristic of a difficult class. It is recommended that too avoid disappointment that may come from unmet expectations of both faculty and students, faculty members should assess their students' expectations and take time to address inconsistencies with their own. (Contains 1 figure, 2 tables, and 14 references.) (Author/JDM)

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ED 460 328

Running head: STUDENTS EXPECT HIGH GRADES FOR LOW EFFORT

# Students' Expectations of Workload and Grade Distributions by Class Difficulty

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether students expected course difficulty to be reflected in grade distributions and in the amount of out-of-class effort required for success. Students from both upper and lower division classes described the amount of time they expected to spend preparing for an easy class, a difficult class and a class taught at just the right level. They also indicated their expectations regarding the grade distribution in classes of varying difficulty. There was no difference between upper and lower division students on any measure. Students believed that both an easy course and a course taught at just the right level would have a negatively skewed grade distribution, whereas a difficult course would have a normal distribution. On average, students believed that the appropriate number of out-of-class hours/week was 4.9 ($SD$ = 4.06). Further, students in this sample would judge the 6-9 hours of out-of-class work typically recommended as characteristic of a difficult class. To avoid disappointment that may come from unmet expectations (both faculty and student), faculty members should assess their students expectations and take time to address inconsistencies with their own.

Students' Expectations of Workload and Grade Distributions by Course Difficulty

Asking students to describe their attitudes toward and their expectations about education is an important component of designing successful learning experiences (Capporrimo, 2001). If students and professors have different educational expectations there may be negative emotional outcomes for both the students and the professor (Gaultney & Cann, 2001; Pearse, 2000). Student rancor, born from this conflict of assumptions, can have a negative impact on the students' evaluation of the instructor (Pearse, 2000; Tata, 1999). One concern is that grade inflation, prevalent at all educational levels, may have led students to believe that for a class to be considered appropriate it should not require much effort and should result in high grades for most students (Basinger, 1997; Chadwick & Ward, 1989; Gaultney & Cann, 2001).

Grade inflation is an unintended consequence of viewing students as consumers rather than as apprentices (Snare, 1997). Because students are over-committed, they have embraced enthusiastically the "student-as-consumer" metaphor offered to them by institutions of higher education (Levine, 1993; Pearse, 2000; Snare, 1997). For the current generation of undergraduates employment and familial obligations often eclipse their commitment to learning (Levine, 1993; Pearse, 2000). Pearse (2000) described a student who characterized his priorities in the following way: 'I have three priorities. My family comes first, then work, and school gets what is left over (p.42).' In his insightful commentary, Snare (1997) argued that encouraging students to view their education as a commodity fails to teach students that effort and perseverance are necessary components for success in both school and life; instead, the prevailing view is that as long as the tuition is paid, the education is guaranteed. This expectation of achievement without effort appears as early as eighth grade: adolescents have high educational and career aspirations, yet they have no intentions to behave in a manner that is

consistent with achieving these goals (e.g., enrolling in college preparatory courses in high school) (Trusty, 2000). It is no surprise that this mismatch between expectations of success and unwillingness to work for that success continues into college. Eskilson and Wiley (1999) found no correlation between college students' grade point averages and value placed on achieving high financial success. Therefore, those college students who have lofty dreams about their futures work no harder in college than do those who do not possess such high hopes.

This global orientation that success does not require effort manifests itself in the cavalier manner with which students approach their classes. McDougall and Granby (1997) reported that over 90% of students in their study failed to complete an assigned reading prior to class time and 70% of those same students, not surprisingly, could not provide even one correct answer on a 20-item pop quiz. Marburger (2001) reported that most of the students he surveyed believed that missing six class periods per semester is an acceptable absentee rate. Further, only about one-third of the students who missed class bothered to read the textbook coverage of the missed material (Marburger). Clearly student study habits are inconsistent with professors' expectations. The work reviewed here suggests that students underestimate how much work is required for learning. In the present study, I asked students about what they hold to be reasonable workload expectations and grade outcomes for a class. In particular, I was interested in how students used effort expended and grade distributions to discriminate between easy classes, hard classes and classes taught at just the right level.

## Method

### *Participants*

Fifty-seven students enrolled in a lower division Psychology course (Introduction to Psychology) and 46 students enrolled in an upper level Psychology course (Cognitive

Psychology) participated as part of first-day of class activities. To assure anonymity, no identifying information (including demographics) was requested.

*Procedures*

On the first day of class, students filled out a survey the instructions on which read: "The purpose of this questionnaire is to gain understanding about how students decide whether a class is taught at the appropriate level (i.e., too easy or too hard). I am particularly interested in how grade distributions and amount of effort required for success factor into this judgement." Students indicated for a difficult class, an easy class and a class taught at just the right level: a) the percent of the class they expected to earn As, Bs, Cs, Ds and Fs and b) the number of hours per week outside of class time they expected to spend studying.

## Results

*Expected Grade Distribution Analyses*

A Mixed-Design Repeated Measures ANOVA was used to analyze responses about each grade category (i.e., As, Bs, Cs, Ds, and Fs). In all cases the between-groups factor was Course in Which Student was Enrolled (Introduction to Psychology or Cognitive Psychology) and the within-groups factor was Class Difficulty (difficult, just right and easy). The dependent measure in each case was judgement regarding the percentage of students who should achieve a specific grade. In none of the analyses was course in which students were enrolled a significant predictor responses about grade categories (all $F$s < 2.01) nor did that factor interact with class difficulty (all $Fs$< 2.8). Therefore, the findings regarding grade expectations by class difficulty presented in Figure 1 are collapsed across the Cognitive Psychology and Introductory Psychology courses.

For all analyses, class difficulty significantly predicted judgements about specific grade distributions (see Table 1 for relevant statistics). Bonferroni corrected pairwise comparisons

were used to explicate the relationship between class difficulty and expected grade distributions; the statistically significant findings ($p < .05$) from these analyses are described below. Students believed significantly more As should be awarded in an easy class than in both a class taught at just the right level and a difficult class, and that significantly more As should be awarded in a class taught at just the right level than in a difficult class. Students expected significantly fewer Bs in a difficult class than in a just right or an easy class. Grade distributions for easy classes were expected to have significantly fewer students earning Cs than distributions in either difficult classes or classes taught at just the right level. Likewise, students in classes taught at just the right level were expected to earn fewer Cs than those in difficult classes. Expectations about the frequency with which Ds would be assigned followed the same pattern described for the Cs (i.e., easy classes would show the least number of Ds followed by classes taught at just the right level and then by difficult classes). Only the students in the difficult class were expected to earn significantly more Fs than were those in an easy class or in a class taught at just the right level.

*Expected Preparation Time Analyses*

A Mixed-Design Repeated Measures ANOVA was used to analyze how much time students expected to spend studying. The between-groups factor was Course Enrolled In (Introduction to Psychology or Cognitive Psychology) and the within-groups factor Class Difficulty (difficult, just right and easy). The dependent measure was the number of hours outside of class students expected to study. Because 2 students failed to complete the relevant questions and 1 student's responses were 2 standard deviations above the mean, data from 100 students were used in this set of analyses. The only significant predictor of the students' estimates of the time they would spend studying was that of class difficulty ($F(2, 97) = 68.65$, $p = .0001$). Therefore, the findings presented in Table 2 are collapsed across the Cognitive

Psychology and Introductory Psychology classes. Bonferroni corrected pairwise comparisons revealed that students expected to spend significantly ($p < .05$) more time studying for a difficult class than for either a class taught at just the right level or an easy one. They also expected to study significantly ($p < .05$) more for a class taught at just the right level than for an easy class.

## Discussion

The results of this study show that introductory-level and advanced students share similar expectations regarding grade distributions and effort requirements for courses of varying difficulty. Rather than displaying a positive skew, the distribution for the difficult class most resembled a normal distribution. The easy and the just right class distributions were negatively skewed with As and Bs as modal grades. Together these results confirm previous findings that although students report that they prefer to be graded using a normal distribution (Gaultney & Cann, 2001; Wendell, Parducci & Roman, 1989), Gaultney and Cann found that when they asked students to describe a fair grading distribution the students chose one with characteristics similar to the one the present sample attributed to the easy and just right classes. The present data echo Gaultney and Cann's (2001) report that 61% of the students they sampled indicated that receiving a good grade was what they hoped to accomplish during a class. In the current study, students indicated that nearly 50% of the students in a class taught at just the right level should receive an A or B. The present data are consistent with the notion that students expect high achievement to be an ordinary, rather than an extraordinary, occurrence.

The fallacious expectation that as a matter of course most students should be rated as above average is made even more dangerous when coupled with students' lack of understanding about the connection between achievement and effort. Students in the present study judged a course that required about 8 hours of outside work/week as difficult, yet their college's stated

expectation is: "A three-credit hour course will require 6-9 hours of work each week outside of class (Metropolitan State College of Denver Catalog, 2000, p. 61)." Our college's expectation is consistent with national standards: "Students are supposed to spend at least two hours studying outside of class for every hour in class (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2000, p. 6)." The 4.9 hours/week of studying students in the present study indicated was just right falls below this mark, but is consistent with national data. The National Survey of Student Engagement (2000) found that only 15% of students study at least 2 hours outside class/hour in class--more than half of those surveyed spent about only about 3 hours/week preparing for a 3-credit hour class.

Given that self-report data is susceptible to socially desirable responding, it is likely, and unfortunate, that students are actually spending less time studying than they've indicated in these surveys. It appears that although the students in the present sample did not expect to spend an adequate amount of time outside of class learning material, they still expected that their grades would reflect better than average learning. Grade inflation in schools may have led students to believe that for a class to be considered just right in difficulty it should not require much effort and result in high grades for most students (Basinger, 1997; Gaultney & Cann, 2001). Not surprisingly, Gaultney and Cann (2001) found that students prefer learning that is easy. This preference/expectation is likely to lead to dissatisfaction and resentment among students whose grades reflect their actual level of effort.

Although the findings from the present work are somewhat discouraging, there may be some tactics instructors can use during the first class meetings to minimize student disappointment while maintaining appropriate academic standards. First, instructors should outline specific expectations regarding workload by quoting the institutions' policy on the

appropriate ratio of out-of-class work to in-class work on the syllabus and by verbally highlighting this information. An anonymous survey can be given to the class to find out what their workload and grading expectations are; the information gathered can then be used as a springboard for an in-class discussion. To illustrate the typical grading outcomes for a course, the instructor can present students with a graph depicting the average grade distribution across semesters for that course. Finally, instructors could invite students who did well in the course during previous semesters to make a class presentation in which they discuss strategies for success with new students. At the very least, because these techniques unequivocally convey what it takes to master the course material, their use may eliminate shock and reduce the resulting animosity that can occur when students who are putting in too little effort receive poor grades. Given grade inflation, students' expectations about the amount of effort required to receive good grades most likely are properly calibrated. Sadly, those of us who assign grades on the basis of achievement must take pains to alert students to our increasingly unusual evaluation procedure.

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Pamela I. Ansburg, Department of Psychology. Previous work by the first author published under the name Pamela I. Dallob.

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Table 1

*Main Effects for Class Difficulty on Judgements of Grade Distributions by Grade Category*

| Grade Category | *F* Value |
|---|---|
| As | 85.29 |
| Bs | 14.71 |
| Cs | 43.25 |
| Ds | 65.20 |
| Fs | 21.53 |

Note: All *df*s = 2, 100 and all *F*s significant at $p < .0001$

Table 2

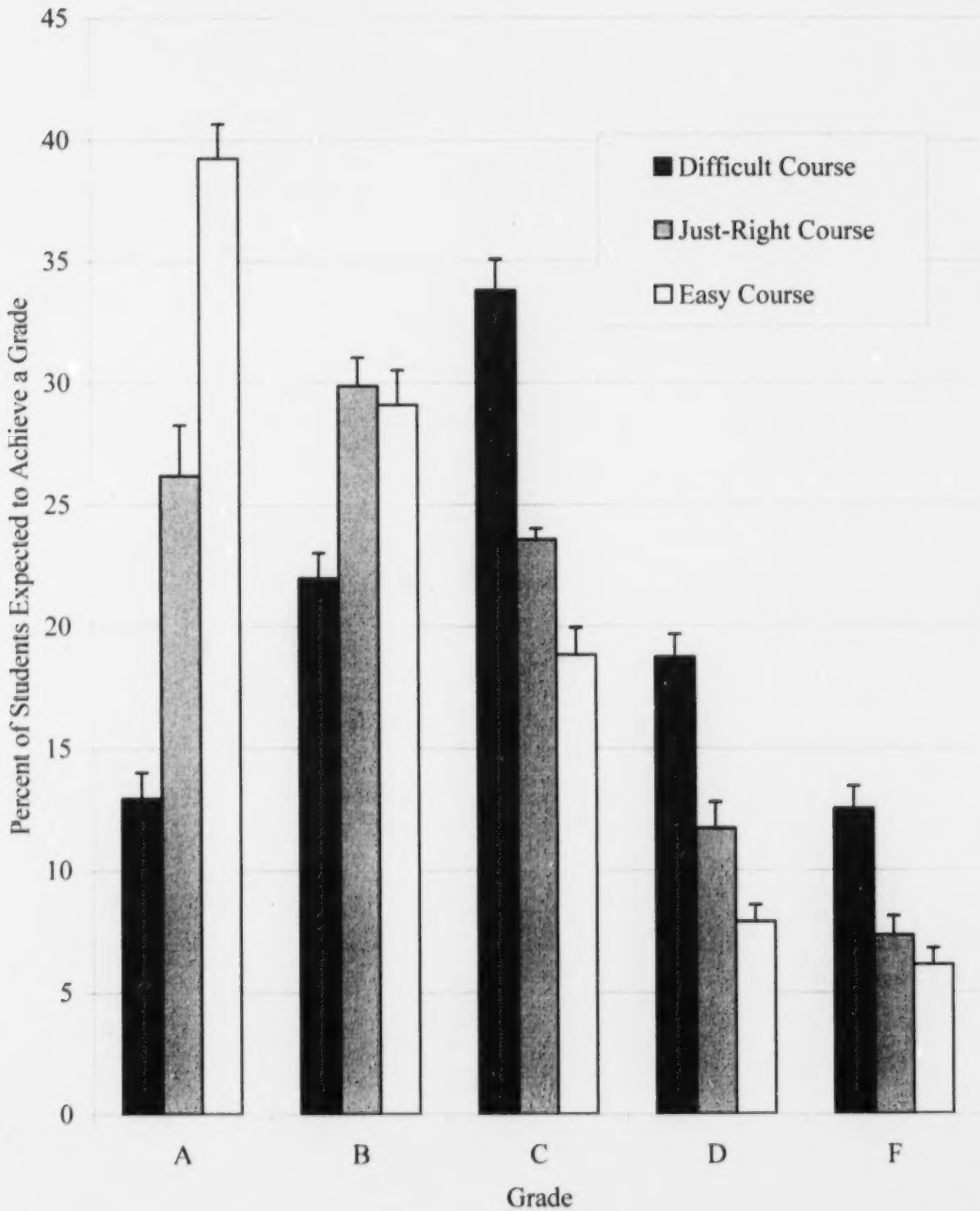
*Mean Number of Hours Expect to Spend by Course Difficulty (N = 100)*[a]

| Course Difficulty | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Difficult Course | 8.31 | 6.25 |
| Just Right Course | 4.93 | 4.06 |
| Easy Course | 2.77 | 2.51 |

[a] Bonferroni corrected pairwise comparisons showed all means differ significantly from one another ($p<.05$).

Figure Caption

*Figure 1.* Expected grade distributions by class difficulty


45
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
Percent of Students Expected to Achieve a Grade
Difficult Course
Just-Right Course
Easy Course
A
B
C
D
F
Grade